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ABSTRACT

In 1995, Cerritos College implemented a "Learning Community" approach with the intent of strengthening student academic success, especially among non-traditional, first generation college students. Thirty Learning Community clusters, seventy classes/instructors, and over four hundred students have been part of the learning communities projects since its inception. Cerritos College's model uses four interrelated approaches: development of a curriculum based on current brain research, identification and implementation of essential learning skills, integration of technology into the learning process, and cultural sensitivity. Approximately 150 students who were enrolled in Spring 1997 Title III Learning Community Courses completed a survey, expressing their level of familiarity and comfort with Integrated Thematic Instruction principles, self-described skill levels, feelings on the importance of various instructional methods, and reasons for choosing the Learning Community. Seventy-seven of those students also participated in a survey at the end of the semester. Results include: (1) student satisfaction rates rose from 90% to 98.7%; (2) anxiety levels were higher at the end of the semester than at the beginning; (3) 97% of the students indicated that material presented in a practical context facilitated learning; (4) active student participation increased; and (5) almost 75% of the students preferred untimed tests. Student comments solicited through open questions are also presented, as are faculty reflections. (VF)

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Learning Community/Title III Project

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LEARNING COMMUNITY/TITLE III PROJECT

CERRITOS COLLEGE
Norwalk, CA
11/09/98

Our Vision of the Value of Learning Communities

The Learning Community encourages the student...

To reach for her/his potential,

To see things as part of a bigger picture,

To open her/his mind,

To listen and hear what others have to say,

To share her/his experiences,

To enjoy fully the process of learning, and

To have fun!

OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

Fostering Strong Collaborative Partnerships
and Interdisciplinary Cooperation:

Initiated in August 1995, the learning community approach to teaching has been an innovative and active addition to instruction at Cerritos College. This project is supported by a five-year Title III grant (1995-2000). Its primary intent to strengthen student academic success, especially among non-traditional, first generation college students.

The interdisciplinary learning communities' model has promoted the environment of great intellectual interaction between faculty and students, curricular coherence (reinforcement and/or integration of ideas), understanding issues which cross subject matter boundaries, exploring and understanding diverse perspectives, active learning (student-centered), student retention, technology, and faculty development. Thirty learning community clusters, seventy classes/instructors, and over four hundred students have been part of the learning communities projects since its inception.

Innovative, Future-Oriented and Technologically Advanced

The Learning Community approach to instruction links or clusters courses around a common theme or concept. This provides students with opportunities to gain deeper understanding and integration of instructional material in their learning.

Cerritos College's model employs three interrelated approaches. These are:

Development of curriculum that provides conditions and methods for more effective student learning. This approach is based on current brain research, and includes such methods as absence of threat, choices by students in the learning process, interactive learning environment, and the like.

Identification and implementation of key learning skills considered being essential for the success by the institution's non-traditional, first generation college students. Faculty and administrators of the Cerritos College learning community project identified these learning skills. These are college readiness, communication, critical thinking/scientific reasoning, teamwork, and technology.

Integration of technology into the learning process. Examples include faculty-student communication via email, research projects using sources on the Internet, and multimedia presentations for the traditional classroom as well as distance education.

Cultural awareness and sensitivity, using curricula and classroom interaction to validate each individual's perspective and beliefs.

Learning Communities Survey, Spring 1997 Time 2 Outcomes
by JoAnn Smartt-Gaither

One hundred and fifty-one students who enrolled in Spring 1997 Title III Learning Community courses completed a Time 1 Learning Communities Survey. At the onset of the Learning Community course, students identified their level of exposure, comfort, and familiarity with key Integrated Thematic Instruction (ITI) principles, self-reported current skill levels (e.g., study skills, vocabulary, and critical thinking), provided information on perceived

importance of various instructional delivery methods, and indicated why they chose to enroll in a Learning Community. The Time 1 Survey served as a collection point for baseline data. Seventy-seven student participants completed the Time 2 Survey, which was administered at the end of the semester. This survey provides a point of comparison for "before and after" snapshots of student perceptions of the ITI influence.

The Time 2 responses when compared to the Time 1 responses afford Cerritos College the opportunity to examine behavioral changes that might have occurred as a result of Learning Community involvement. In the Time 2 Survey students were also asked to provide open-ended information about their Learning Community experiences, providing qualitative as well as quantitative feedback.

In comparing the Time 1 baseline data with the Time 2 Surveys, the following observations were made:

Integrated Thematic Instruction (ITI) principles

Absence of Threat:

Research indicates that a learning environment rife with stress, fear, and anxiety forces the learner to operate at a level controlled by lower brain functions, hampering learning. In examining student responses to questions designed to assess environmental threat, it appears that the vast majority of students surveyed do not perceive Cerritos College as a threatening learning environment. However, stress related issues did tend to increase after completion of the semester course work.

At Time 1, less than 22% of the students surveyed indicated that they experienced anxiety in the classroom; this number rose to greater than 37% at the close of the semester. A smaller percentage (13.3%) felt isolated from other students at Time 1 compared to Time 2 (18.5%).

The students surveyed stated that academic instruction at Cerritos College met their needs. Over the course of the semester, student satisfaction rate rose from 90% to 98.7%. This increased satisfaction rate also included students' views of their needs being met by the array of student services offered (T1 = 60%; T2 = 69%).

Meaningful Context

Brain research indicates that learning begins with identifying the familiar and meaningful. The brain looks for patterns, gradually moving out to abstract concepts.

Cerritos College students validate this finding. At Time 2 over 97% of the students surveyed indicated that it was easier to learn course material when it was presented in a practical context they could relate to. This number is up from the Time 1 Survey (90%) and may be an indicator of the thematic focus of the Learning Communities.

Choices

At least seven different learning modalities exist. In recognizing that people learn in different ways, it is important to provide opportunities that maximize

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the processing and expression of learned information.

Cerritos College students increased their active participation in classroom discussions (78.1% to 80.5%) and study groups (67.5% to 69.7%) in their roles as active learners.

Adequate Time

One of the cornerstones of ITI is to ensure that all students have enough time to master course material.

Almost two-thirds of the Cerritos College students surveyed preferred to learn at their own pace, supporting this ITI principle. This finding also extends to testing. Almost 75% of the students surveyed prefer untimed tests and exams.

Enriched Environment

Research shows that human beings do not process information in a linear, lock-step fashion, but respond to a multitude of inputs, flooding the senses. This finding is supported by Cerritos College students.

Among the students surveyed, over 92% agreed that it was easier to learn and retain course information when it was presented in a number of different ways.

Collaboration

Research indicates that collaboration is beneficial to both faster and slower students, helping students gain mastery of course material and learn from peer role models, respectively.

At both Time 1 and Time 2, almost 90% of the Learning Community students surveyed enjoyed working in groups with other students. Over 90% indicated that helping other students learn course material reinforced their own learning.

Immediate Feedback

ITI believes that a student's best reward for learning is immediate feedback, a statement supported by Learning Community students. Over 90% of the Learning Community students surveyed indicated that it was easier to learn course material when they had immediate feedback about their performance in the course.

Self-Reported Skill Level

Learning Community students were asked to rate their skill level in a number of areas.

The highest rated skills (in rank order, highest first) were:

Rank	Time 1 Survey	Time 2 Survey
1	vocabulary skills	critical thinking skills
2	critical thinking skills	vocabulary skills
3	study skills	study skills
4	research techniques	research skills

The lowest self-reported skills were (in rank order, lowest first):

Rank	Time 1 Survey	Time 2 Survey
12	e-mail skills	internet skills
11	internet skills	oral presentation skills
10	computer skills	computer skills

Instructional Delivery Methods

At the beginning of the Learning Community course, students still appear to be most comfortable with traditional instructional delivery methods.

Overall, students reported that lectures and classroom participation were important or very important to learning. While there was a 1.6% decrease in the percentage of students who believed that lectures were important, a 4.4% increase was observed among students who believed that classroom participation was important. Fewer students indicated that guest speakers (T1=76.2%; T2=74.3%), video presentations (T1=70.6%; T2=76.5%), computer applications (T1=67.8%; T2=70.6%), and field trips (T1=65.1%; T2=70.2%) were important/very important to learning.

Learning Community Course Enrollment

Why do students enroll in Learning Communities? Over half of the students surveyed cited the following reasons (most often cited listed first):

Time 1:

Interested in the combination of classes offered

The learning communities concept seemed interesting

Learning community courses are transferable

Taking the combination of courses would be beneficial

Time 2:

Interested in the combination of classes offered

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The learning communities concept seemed interesting

Taking the combination of courses would be beneficial

Learning community courses are transferable

Qualitative Observations

The Time 2 Survey included an additional response sheet with five open-ended questions covering four main areas of student perceptions.

When asked if they were able to do their personal best in the Learning Community classes, fifty-two percent of the students answered positively and were pleased with what they had accomplished. Thirty-three percent answered negatively, while 8% believed they could have done better if they were able to improve their time management.

"...learned more about myself...helped me redefine my personal best"

"...[it] motivated us to do better"

"...were greatly encouraged to do our best and even better"

"...time management was a real problem for me"

"...failed to use my time productively"

Time management and prioritizing events seemed to be a hallmark concept expressed by a majority of the students This is reflected in both their experiences that distracted from their studies and in distinguishing the advantages and disadvantages of the Learning Community classes.

A key thread that runs throughout the qualitative data is that the students enjoy the camaraderie of the Learning Community focus. They appreciated the small class size and emphasis on shared learning as opposed to competitiveness in regular classes.

"a special advantage is that we had chance[s] to study in groups and work together"

"...it was easy to talk to the teacher or in class since the class is very small"

"...friendly atmosphere "

"one-on-one relationship with the teacher"

"I felt comfortable...caused me to express myself much better"

However, thoughts were expressed about the isolation that was felt from being in the linked classes.

"I felt isolated from Cerritos College"

"...cooped up in the same room all day"

"...if you don't like a class or teacher you have to stay because it is linked to the others"

"...it is confusing, need to be more organized"

"...tied to a class you don't like"

When asked about any special circumstances that might have distracted them for completing the linked courses, those expressing opinions stated personal problems, job restrictions and child care issues as the most frequent causes of stress. When asked how they managed to cope with these distractions, many stated that the structure of the Learning Community classes aided in helping them to remain committed and focused. With the assistance of classmates and instructors they were able to complete assignments and fulfill requirements.

Chief disadvantages voiced by the respondents were lack of time to complete the volume of work assigned, frustration with internet access, and computer time consumption.

A metaphoric statement was presented to the students to capture their view of the Learning Community experience. Over 50% attempted the exercise, providing insight about how Learning Communities can be effective. In summation, the students agree that what is gained from the experience is chiefly tied to what they put into the process. Participating in a Cerritos College Learning Community is like...

"...building a model car, the stronger the base, the more stable the product when finished"

"...raising a child; the more attention it is given, the better the behavior"

"...learning to walk; you take it step by step"

" learning to drive; you may have a few problems but experience and practice will get you through"

"cooking; you need the right ingredients and enough time in order for he meal to turn out perfect"

Concluding Observations

The students who participated in Learning Communities felt the overall experience was a positive one, especially from the aspects of shared learning experiences, less competitiveness, increased interaction with faculty, and the ability to express themselves in the small group setting.

Disadvantages, though few, were similar among the respondents in that they were overwhelmed with work, needed more access to computer on-line time, and needed classes scheduled to meet the needs of working students. Many self-diagnosed that proper or improved time management skills would alleviate many of their stresses. From both a quantitative and qualitative slant, the Learning Community concept seems to be a viable and well received teaching model.

Recommendations for Future Surveys

It would prove beneficial to ask the respondents of their possible intention to select future Learning Communities courses and whether they would recommend this type of experience to a friend. Feedback from these questions would provide additional evidence about their satisfaction level with the experiences they encountered.

Issues of Student Retention: Faculty Reflections

The following are comments by four faculty participants in the Learning Communities Project of Title III --- Suzanne Ashe, Agnes Duran, Sylvai Bello-Gardner, and Betty Wolfe.

These individuals offer a Learning Community targeted for students needing basic skills. Theirs is one of the most successful ventures of our project, and the following comments are well worth reading and pondering.

We met today to discuss the retention problem in our Spring 1998 triad, taught by Suzanne, Betty, and Agnes--and we invited Sylvia to join us in discussing her past experience with our earlier triads, as well as our plans for the next academic year.

Achieving a high degree of student retention has always been a significant objective of the Title III program, and the triads with which we have been involved have had solid success in this area. However, our drop rate in Spring 1998 was roughly 50%, so we decided to meet today and brainstorm about the problem. We would like to share some of our thoughts and observations on this issue with you.

Background

1. Our triad (English 50.2, Reading 54, and Reading 59) tends to attract high-risk students--and thus has some built-in problems with retention. Many of these students are not fully committed to taking the courses in the first place, and for a host of reasons, including the following:

They may have ill-defined educational and career goals, rendering them uncertain about how these courses--or any college courses--can serve their immediate or long-term needs.

They may have inner conflicts or doubts about their ability to succeed in these or in any academic courses--and may feel uncomfortable about putting themselves in a situation in which they have not had a lot of success in the past.

They may have conflicting demands on their time, as they are often pulled by the need to hold down a job and tend to family responsibilities, as well as keep up with the work of the courses.

They may not have the support, understanding, and encouragement they need from family, friends, peers, coworkers, bosses, and the community as a whole to stay with the often difficult and tedious tasks involved in taking college courses.

They may lack the inner discipline and the practical skills required to tackle academic tasks that require critical thinking and problem solving--including dealing with the often irksome problems involved in typing papers or using computers to access the Internet.

They may not be able to see how complicating the tasks involved in these courses relates to achieving more distant goals, like attaining a degree, getting a good-paying job, or having the lifestyle they want for themselves and their families.

(Of course, all of the above traits may be attributed to community college students as a whole, but they seem particularly consistent with the students in these courses.)

2. Many of the students in this triad were recruited through conventional means--i.e. they self-selected the courses, some at the end of registration. As a result, some were fairly marginal candidates for success from the outset, as they may have had a rather tentative commitment to becoming students in the first place. We believe that, for many of these students, the goal of completing these courses was tenuous at best. So, they found it easy to slip away when problems (like transportation or child care) or challenges (like writing papers, completing projects, or taking tests) presented themselves. In other words, their threshold for "academic pain" was very low! In the face of those challenges--and without a strong resolve or ample support in their personal lives--they found it easier to leave than to stay.

Retention Strategies

Here are a few of the approaches we took during the semester to support our students and encourage them to stay:

Presented students with clear class objectives and expectations, with information about the resources available to them, including us as instructors, the counselors, the library, the LAP, the assessment and job placement centers.

Engaged the students in creating their own objectives for themselves as individual learners and for the class as a whole, by spending class sessions discussing them and then having the students write about them.

Conducted the classes on an ITI-based model, stressing collaborative and interactive learning, in-class conferencing, and practical projects emphasizing critical thinking and problem solving. Projects included research on cross-cultural and career issues.

Took students on off-campus field trips to UC Irvine and A Noise Within (theater in Glendale) to expose them to educational and cultural experiences outside of this geographic community.

Brought guest speakers to class from the job placement center and administration of justice department on campus to inform students about resources and motivate them to access them and to offer them ideas and motivation to do their research projects.

Provided exposure to campus technology, including training on the Internet, e-mail, and the computer-based college catalog system, especially EBSCO Host for periodical research.

Led students on campus tours to the Learning Assistance Program, library, and Assessment Center for exposure to these facilities and practical instruction in using them.

Personally contacted students who were at risk of dropping out to offer them encouragement and support; encouraged other students to contact them and motivate them to continue.

Conclusions

We have all had exposure to retention research, especially through attendance at seminars and workshops presented by experts such as Vincent Tinto and Laura Rendon. And we have reviewed the literature provided by them and by Francine DeFrance, our Title III retention expert--with whom we also met and brain stormed before the semester began. But we are interested in developing a deeper understanding of why so many of our students did not persist in our triad this semester. And, of course, we are eager to apply that new insight to our learning communities this coming fall and spring.

We have all met to review these findings--and to create new strategies for the 1998-99 academic year. One key, we believe, is for us to begin with a more methodical recruitment of students. Agnes Luran has focused her

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efforts on that problem by designing a letter and flyer to be mailed to 800 potential students--those who have completed English 50.1 and Reading 53 this spring. We want to identity students who are ready to make a serious commitment to the learning experience--from the start.

In addition, we are reviewing our curricula and methodology with the same essential question in mind: How can we revamp our approach to this triad so that we can help more students complete the semester successfully? We plan to meet this summer to brainstorm practical solutions to this problem. And we welcome the opportunity to dialogue with you or other concerned faculty and administrators.

Student Testimonials From Title III -- Learning Communities

Spring 1997

Taking this "test" has made me realize that I have to understand why people sometimes do things that I don't approve of. Now I will be able to get along better with others.

The class helped me learn to interact with others and made it easier.

In what ways were the learning community classes supportive of your learning: You get to know your teacher and other students better and get a better understanding knowing that you are heard and that the teacher is there to answer your questions.

The outside class experiences were great. I was very motivated after hearing them. I'm very glad guest speakers came to our class because sometimes I felt like giving up.

I have learned how important it is for us to have a plan to give us some type of direction or goals to reach for and to motivate us to action. It reminded me of a scripture verse, "Where there is no vision the people parish."

I have many resources to help me meet my goals, like the ones on campus and other family and friends. I will use these resources now that I know they are there for me.

I have begun to recognize, "the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of

pain" as a primary factor in my life. I now understand that a major part of maturity is accepting and dealing with consequences to the best of ones ability.

We are in control of ourselves as much as are emotions are. I put this to work with a recent argument I had with my father. He wanted me to pay him more money than what we had agreed on weeks before. He was yelling and I felt there was no where else to go with the subject. I chose to walk away. In the past I would have argued back and made matters worse.

Previous to this class I tried to make decisions blindly. I was missing the first step. Now I have made it a practice to define my objective when making decisions.

This class has made me see a lot of things that I used to ignore.

This class has helped me organize myself and think a little clearer about school.

The information given to me is this class will help me by collecting information the correct way. Doing research was one of our field trips to the library once. I know that this information will help me in different classes that I will take in the future.

With this class I have a clean picture of where I am going and the steps to get there.

The whole CG 20 class has been helpful and very interesting. I am glad I enrolled in the class.

This class was a toolbox full of different kinds of powerful tools.

I learned that I have to work on my time management and be more organized in my classes if I want to achieve my goals.

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If I had taken this class I would probably still be lost in the jungle in search of meaning and self. I've discovered who I am, what I want and what I'm all about.

The information I learned in CG 20 will help me accomplish my dreams. First I will begin to give more thought to a time management schedule. I also learned that I am in control of my life, not someone else doing it for me. This along with self-discipline will help me achieve my goals.

Before I entered this class I didn't have a clue how much it would help me. This class has motivated me in a way to stay in school because the school is there to support me and help me. I have learned to learn.

CG 20 class has helped me take stock in my relationships with others. I can now assess where I stand with others and where they stand with me. Now I feel I have a choice in how I respond to them. I am aware of my feelings.

The information that I learned in CG 20 class has been really valuable to me. The things I have learned can help me accomplish some of the goals I set because I know that in order for things to happen I must take action. I now understand that I am in control of my life.

This class really made me realize and understand the importance of goals and the steps to achieving them.

I plan to attain my goals by staying focused paying attention and noticing when I'm slacking off. I will reach out for help whenever I need it. I will go to a counselor, friend, instructor, and tutor, whomever I can. Doing so will keep me on track.

The way I see myself as an individual and as a college student has changed in the sense that now I know what type of person I am. I know why I react the way I do in certain situations and how it all affects the way I see myself as a student.

The positive side to all this is that now I know I like to learn by working with other people and that I am an extravert.